DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 160 SP 033 961

AUTHOR Johnston, Sue
TITLE Experience Is the Best Teacher...Or Is It? An Analysis of the Role of Experience in Learning To Teach.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Elementary Education; *Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; Interviews; *Learning Experience; *Learning Processes; Objectives; Observation; Preservice Teacher Education; Role Models; *Role Perception; *Student Teachers; Teacher Educators; *Teaching Experience

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to analyze the process of learning to teach from the perspective of the student teacher. Issues associated with how student teachers perceive experiences contributing to their learning process form the basis of the analysis. Data referred to come from a larger study conducted over 3 years which explored the perceptions of student teachers preparing to become primary and early childhood teachers. Participants in the current study were eight student teachers involved in their final school experience before graduation. Findings were derived from interviews (excerpted in the document) and formal and informal observations. The role of the learning process is discussed in terms of setting goals, modelling the supervising teacher, gaining experience by doing, developing routines, and learning by trial and error. Two concerns are raised about the ways in which student teachers perceive experiences contributing to learning to teach: the first relates to the limited experiences which student teachers "count" as helping them learn to teach; the second is the passive approach to building up a stock of experiences to draw on directly during their later careers. It is suggested that teacher educators have a role in challenging these perceptions. (LL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED347160

EXPERIENCE IS THE BEST TEACHER .... OR IS IT?

An analysis of the role of experience in learning to teach

Sue Johnston
Queensland University of Technology
School of Curriculum and Professional Studies
Kelvin Grove Campus
Locked Bag No. 2
RED HILL 4059
Australia

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1992.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Johnston

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SP033961

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EXPERIENCE IS THE BEST TEACHER ..... OR IS IT?
An analysis of the role of experience in learning to teach.

ABSTRACT

Athough the notion of experience features very prominently in the discussions of student teachers when they talk about how they learn to teach, the way in which school experiences contribute to this learning process is not well understood. In this paper, interviews with student teachers who are involved in their final school experience before graduation are used to explore the role of experience from the perspective of the student teacher. The learning process is discussed in terms of setting goals, modelling the supervising teacher, gaining experience by doing, developing routines and learning by trial and error. Two concerns are raised about the ways in which the student teachers in the study perceive experience contributing to learning to teach. These concerns relate to the limited experiences which student teachers "count" as helping them learn to teach and the passive approach they have to building up a stock of experiences to draw on directly during their later careers. It is suggested that teacher educators have a role in challenging these perceptions.

EXPERIENCE IS THE BEST TEACHER ..... OR IS IT?

An analysis of the role of experience in learning to teach

Introduction

The notion of experience appears frequently in the talk of teachers and student teachers. It is a notion tied very closely to their understanding of the processes involved in learning to teach. Studies frequently report that student teachers view their school-based experiences as the important, central part of pre-service teacher education (Eltis and Cairns, 1982; Price, 1980; Queensland Board of Teacher Education, 1984; Zeichner, 1980). Furthermore, many student teachers believe that the practicum provides the only *real* learning of their teacher education programs (Amarel and Feiman-Nemser, 1988). This is emphasised by Britzman (1991) who concludes that the myth of experience making the teacher "valorizes student teaching as the authentic moment in teacher education and the real ground of knowledge production" (p. 7). The commonly held perception appears to be that a simple relationship exists between the quantity of school experience and the amount of learning - the more experience one has in classrooms, the more one will automatically learn about teaching. But what happens when we delve beneath this simple assumption?

While few would disagree with Zeichner (1986) that the practicum is "a significant occasion for acquiring new knowledge, skills and dispositions" (p. 12), there is surprisingly little understanding of just how this experience contributes to the process of learning to teach. Russell (1991) concludes that "we know those learning to teacher must have 'experience' in schools, but we have no shared conceptualization of how that experience contributes to learning to teach" (p. 9). The value of school experience in teacher education seems to be accepted almost on blind faith. While there would be no desire to develop pre-service programs without a component of field experiences, there is an urgent need to conceptualize more adequately how these experiences contribute to learning to teach.

Such a conceptualization is needed for a number of important reasons. On one level, the recent economic restraints in higher education and, more particularly, teacher education call for greater cost effectiveness and accountability in terms of achieving outcomes (Schneider, 1987). One wonders how much longer the costly budgets associated with practice teaching can be sustained without a more rigorous justification of the contribution which this component makes to the overall process of teacher

preparation. At another level, student teachers and supervising teachers need a clearer understanding of the learning process involved in practice teaching so that they can take an active role in making the most of the often limited time spent in classrooms. Finally, teacher educators need such a conceptualization so that pre-service programs can be structured to ensure that students receive most benefit from the ways in which practicum preparation, placement, supervision and follow-up are arranged.

A conceptualization of how experience contributes to learning to teach is not a simple task. Zeichner (1986) maintains that the shortcomings in understanding the link between experience and learning to teach arises from research studies which fail to acknowledge the complexity of school experience. There is no doubt that superficial survey data will do little to further our conceptualization of this complex issue. One means of delving deeper to unpack some of these complexities is to focus on the perspectives of the student teachers themselves. Guyton and McIntyre (1990), in their review of the research on student teaching and school experiences, advocate more studies which attempt to uncover the meanings that the participants bring to their field experiences. Such a focus also acknowledges the unique perspectives of student teachers who must take on the confusing and often contradictory roles of teachers and students at the same time.

In this paper, I will continue by exploring the process of learning to teach from the perspectives of student teachers. Issues associated with how student teachers perceive experience contributing to their learning process will form the basis of the analysis. Although a complete conceptualization of the role of experience in the process of learning to teach is beyond the scope of this paper, its contribution towards this conceptualization will be that of raising some issues which are problematic and questioning some taken-for-granted assumptions about the role of experience. Some tentative conclusions will be drawn about implications of this study for teacher educators.

Method

The data referred to in this paper come from a larger study, conducted over three years, which has explored the perceptions of student teachers preparing to become primary and early childhood teachers. Student teachers at different stages of their teacher preparation were interviewed by asking open-ended questions which probed their perceptions of teaching, the ways in which they made decisions about teaching and their understanding of the process of learning to teach. A total of thirty-five student teachers have been interviewed over the three year period. Twenty-nine were students in a three

year program at an Australian university and six were at the end of a four year program at a university in the United States.

In this paper, the data relate more specifically to eight student teachers in the last stage of practice teaching before graduation. Interviews took place in the schools where the student teachers were completing their practicum and, in most cases, the interviews were combined with formal and informal observations of the student teachers' practice teaching. To ensure that responses were as open and honest as possible, the interviewer was not their university supervisor and did not participate in any evaluation of the student teachers' performances. For each of the student teachers featured in this paper, four to six interviews took place - each of 30 to 60 minutes duration. This allowed in-depth probing of issues with similar questions being asked over successive interviews to ascertain the level of consistency of responses and to see if perceptions changed during the practice teaching period. Observations of teaching were used to provide material for the interviews so that the discussions could focus on specific incidents rather than merely providing espoused ideas about teaching.

The overall aim of the research project has been to explore the personal practical knowledge of student teachers (Clandinin, 1986; Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1983; Johnston, 1990) - that is, to see student teaching from their perspective, through their eyes, and to understand the developing knowledge which guides their practice. Constant comparison of data throughout the study has ensured that issues which were raised by individual student teachers were further probed and explored with other student teachers to determine their representativeness and to obtain a variety of views about the issues. The study has attempted to value the uniqueness of each individual rather than to submerge individual differences through making generalizations across populations. Instead, trends and issues of common concern were identified and then a variety of perspectives on those issues were sought.

All interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. Excerpts from the transcripts of interviews are used in the paper to support and illustrate points made. The names of the student teachers (pseudonyms), the dates of the interviews and the page numbers of the excerpts in the transcripts are shown in parenthesis. Punctuation has been added and minor grammatical changes made to overcome some of the problems associated with reading conversational speech.

How is the learning process perceived?

Setting goals:

One of the key questions asked several times of the student teachers in the study was about the learning processes in which they were engaged during their practicum. Diane was very positive and had relatively clear views, taking an active part in the process.

> Yes, I am learning all the time, all the time. (Diane 16/5/91, p. 1)
>
> All the time I am feeling more confident that I will be able to do it next year. Even though you know the theory and even though you know the things you can do, you are always learning here. I always feel happy about the little things I can accomplish. I set these little goals for myself and when I accomplish them I get a big kick out of it. (Diane 16/5/91, p. 3)
>
> I came into it [practice teaching] identifying things I needed and then she [her supervising teacher] has thrown things at me I didn't even know existed. I have had to adjust my goals as I went along because of that. (Diane 30/4/91, p. 5)

Diane's responses indicate that she approached her practice teaching with some goals and was conscious of whether these goals were being achieved. She was also willing to modify her goals as dictated by the particular situation she was experiencing and as her supervising teacher widened her views about the teaching process.

Other student teachers were far less clear in their understanding of the learning process in which they were involved and few appeared to approach the practicum with either a pre-determined process in which they would engage or specific goals which they intended to achieve. For most, the process seemed to be a relatively passive one in which they participated willingly, but for which there were few explicit expectations. It was a case of waiting to see and taking whatever came out of it. Such a situation leaves much to chance and places greater responsibility on the type of placement and the role of the supervising teacher in determining the learning outcomes for the student teacher.

Modelling:

In contrast to approaching the practicum with a pre-determined learning process, the student teachers could explain various facets of the learning process as they reflected on the practicum experience in which they were involved. Some described modelling by the supervising teacher as being important and this notion was usually tempered by the additional idea of modifying what they saw to their own personal style of teaching.

> By observing my teacher and seeing how she approaches it and then seeing if it works for me - and it does. She's excellent. (Tammi 2/5/91, p. 2)

> By watching. Using what she uses, but in my own style. Because naturally I have a different style, a different approach. If you use the general idea, but use it in your natural way, then that can only help. (Roger 8/5/91, p. 6)

For those who highlighted modelling as an important part of the learning process, the balance between observation and actual teaching experience became problematic. For Roger, the balance was not as he wished and his very limited ideas about classroom management and teaching strategies were not helped by his supervising teacher's hesitation to provide demonstration lessons.

> I have a very fine co-operating teacher, although I haven't seen her teach that much. So like I said earlier, a lot is just like trial and error. What works and what doesn't ... I ask her for suggestions, but she has let me learn the hard way. I think that's about the best way I can learn. One of the best ways would be to watch a good teacher - that's essential. (Roger 17/4/91, p. 5)

Diane was unsure about the most desirable balance between observation and teaching, concluding that she could only achieve all she wanted if more time were available.

> Yeah, that's what we're trying to do. That's what we were saying about the fine line. How much do I see modelled and how much am I thrown to the dogs, so to speak? I am going to the dogs more than I am seeing modelling. I don't know. I feel pretty strong about doing the teaching myself. I'm not afraid of that. I don't know what I want. If you asked me if I want more of the modelling and less of the teaching, I would say I don't know. I want more time, more hours in the day. That's what I do want. (Diane 30/4/91. p. 6)

Gaining experience:

At some time, most of the student teachers explained their learning process as the result of being actively involved in teaching, often contrasting this learning with that they received in campus-based activities.

> Oh yeah, I'm learning something every day just by being in the classroom. Just how much at that age level, developmentally, they can handle. What they're ready for. What they're not ready for. How to handle little things. (Tammi 2/5/91, p. 2)

> The experience - that's the most useful thing I can get from it [practice teaching]. Experience - it's fine to read about it in a text book, but to actually do it is totally different. So I think that's the most beneficial - the actual experience. (Roger 17/4/91, p. 7)

> One way I am developing as a teacher is in my confidence. The more experience, the more confident I become. That's the major thing. (Roger 17/4/91, p. 8)

The notion of experience was frequently used by the student teachers to explain their learning process. Experience was seen as being equivalent to learning by doing - putting into practice what they learned - and it seemed to have a number of outcomes as far as the student teachers were concerned. Roger mentioned a growth in confidence as resulting from his experience. Others mentioned feeling more comfortable and relaxed within the role of teacher, especially in their relationships with the children. Some student teachers explained how their experience had given them specific knowledge and new strategies for handling particular situations. In other words, by doing something or being confronted with a problem they now felt they knew what to do in future situations where similar circumstances arose.

The student teachers in the study portrayed their learning as a relatively passive process. Generally, they did not seek or orchestrate particular experiences. Rather, it was a case of "gathering up" the experiences that came their way. Tammi described how she was learning something everyday "just by being in the classroom" and Roger felt his confidence grow in proportion to the amount of experience he gained. Similarly, there did not seem to be evidence of any active processing of the experiences in which they participated. Such processing would be necessary to assist in the transferability of the skills they were acquiring. Instead, experience was seen as a way of building up a stock of skills and ideas through actually carrying out the tasks associated with teaching. Although they did not state that they needed to confront *every* situation in order to be able to cope with it in the future, there was little evidence that their experience was being used to gather understandings which would transfer to other contexts and problems. In other words, although a one-to-one relationship was not explicitly described, there appeared to be definite limitations to the transferability of their experiences. It was somewhat like a bank account where student teachers thought they could build up a credit balance by doing more and more. The more time they had at teaching and the wider the range of specific experiences they gained, the larger the credit balance became and the better prepared they felt to have the required skills for circumstances they would face in the future.

Developing routines:

Although the bank balance metaphor was a common one among the student teachers, a few had a more subtle understanding of the role of experience in contributing to the development of routines in teaching. An understanding that teaching involved developing routines and a degree of automaticity featured in the accounts of some of the student teachers. Early in her practice teaching period, Diane was conscious of the amount of thought and effort she had to put into routine tasks in the classroom.

> You have five million things going on in your mind. Nothing is routine. Nothing is routine. Holly's [her co-operating teacher] routine is not a routine for me. When I stand up there to do morning routine, I am thinking over and over in my mind - Have I done this? Have I done that? She could do that with her eyes closed. So even the little things are monumental to me. (Diane 30/4/91, p. 1)

> Like I said, nothing that goes by is routine for me. I have to put as much thought into checking books out as I do into my lesson planning. That's what makes it hard. (Diane 30/4/91, p. 7)

Diane used this understanding of the importance of classroom routines to assist her in learning to become a teacher, consciously deciding what she should take away from her classroom experience. She attempted to see the bigger picture, deciding what she wanted to take away from her practicum that would be useful in her future role as a teacher. She then worked at incorporating these ideas into her own routines.

> What am I doing in this classroom that is routine, that will be routine in my classroom next year? What do I need to let go in this classroom because it probably won't be duplicated in mine? There are some bigger things that I have to have a concept of because I will do them in my classroom next year. I have to define those kind of things. (Diane 30/4/91, p. 7)

> I'm trying to find the real concrete things I can take away from this. What are the really concrete things I can do? What is the big picture of what I am doing and how much am I doing because Holly does it? And letting that kind of stuff go. (Diane 30/4/91, p. 9)

After some weeks of practice teaching, she reflected how these tasks were becoming more routine and that this allowed her to concentrate on the aspects of teaching which required more conscious thought.

> All the time I am feeling more confident that I will be able to do it next year. ... So now that's all falling into place. All those little things are falling into place for me. It makes the job so much easier and you can be so much more effective. Then you can watch the little things that are going on - who's ducking out to go to the bathroom too often, who's playing around, who's getting picked on by whom... (Diane 16/5/91, p. 3)

Tammi also explained how some aspects of teaching had become routine to her, allowing her to think of some of the subtleties of classroom organisation.

> It's starting to get better - a lot better. It's starting to become routine. It's starting to get into my brain where I don't have to think about it. It's starting to come out eight hours a day. It's starting to become more of a habit than having to consciously think about it any more. It's getting better. It comes from being in a classroom eight hours a day and getting to know them better. (Tammi 2/5/91, p. 2)

> There's these little things I'm starting to think about that make the day flow easier, including what instructions I have to give. For example I don't want to start on this yet because I don't want to have an interruption. I never really thought about this before. (Tammi 2/5/91, p. 3)

The work of Leinhardt et al. (1987) suggests that the development of these routines is an extremely important aspect of effective teaching. Their work describes how teachers act as "choreographers" of classroom routines working to establish smooth patterns of behaviours so that students respond in automatic ways to certain cues. These routines free the teacher to concentrate on other, less routine aspects of the teaching task. There is little doubt that this is similar to what Tammi and Diane were describing in their own practice, even though they were not consciously aware of the existence of such routines nor their role in developing these routines. The work of Leinhardt et al. (1987) needs to be extended to ascertain how student teachers may be assisted to develop these routines in a more conscious and systematic way. They are too important to be left for student teachers to learn in such an *ad hoc* way.

Trial and error:

Another common theme in the perceptions of the student teachers was the role of trial and error in their learning process. Here the notion of making mistakes and learning from the mistakes was important.

I've only watched her [the co-operating teacher] teach twice. From there I've been going through it myself. So, I guess it's basically trial and error. What works and what doesn't work. (Roger 17/4/91, p. 1)

The best way to learn is by doing as far as actual teaching. Doing it, making mistakes and learning from mistakes. (Carolyn 15/5/91, p. 1)

When describing their school experiences in these terms, there were strong connotations of the discomfort associated with learning in this way. Obviously no-one enjoyed making mistakes, especially in the public arena of practice teaching, but trial and error was a commonly held perception of the purpose of their experience in schools. In this respect, learning from experience was associated with learning the hard way. Diane talked about being "thrown to the dogs" and others also described the difficulties of learning by trial and error in this public setting.

Much of the discomfort associated with learning from trial and error arose because there was a strong element of evaluation in the practicum. It is not surprising that such difficulties do exist when the complex task of learning to teach is simultaneously being evaluated. The pressures this caused for student teachers and the inconsistencies it represented were apparent in many of their comments.

I'm getting very frustrated. I told my co-operating teacher that the reason I am getting frustrated is because I am getting evaluated. I would handle it differently if I weren't being evaluated. (Tammi 6/5/91, p. 7)

I spoke earlier about a trial and error type of thing. That's basically what it is, but this is not a place for trial and error. I think you've got to produce in order to make the grade. (Roger 1/5/91, p. 1)

You go all day and you're being observed and critiqued. (Diane 30/4/91, p. 1)

It would be wonderful if the idea were to let me make my mistakes before I went into a teaching experience where it really counts. That is not how a student teacher feels. She feels she is being observed and graded and she can't be herself and that every word that comes out of her mouth is going to be critiqued. She is being watched and it is constant. For ninety per cent of student teachers, they can't wait for the teacher to walk out of the room. It's probably best if the teacher does walk out because for better or worse the student teacher will establish a real relationship with those children based on the way she is. You get evaluated all the time, every time you make a move. Just look at the evaluation sheet. (Diane 28/5/91, p. 1)

The need for teachers to feel freedom to experiment with new ideas and solve problems in creative ways has been well documented (Eisner, 1983; Rubin, 1989). However, it would seem that the evaluation pressures of practice teaching give our student teachers very contradictory messages about the appropriateness of such risk-taking behaviour. Although this unfortunate side effect of evaluating student teaching has been acknowledged by a number of researchers, it continues to present difficulties to our student teachers - difficulties which have the potential to affect the way in which they approach their teaching throughout their careers.

Summary:

Student teachers held a range of perceptions about the processes of learning to teach. Few seemed to approach the task in a very systematic way through setting goals and using their school experiences to achieve these goals. Most hoped to get the best from their experience, but many encountered some disappointments. Modelling and adapting the supervising teacher's strategies were seen as ways in which student teachers learned about teaching. Learning by doing was a widespread notion of the process of learning to teach. In this respect, it was important for student teachers to gain as much experience as possible so that they could build a large repertoire of experiences to use when needed in their careers. The banking metaphor, which was common among the student teachers, meant that experiences were filed away to build up a healthy credit balance. Some student teachers were aware that their experience was leading to the development of routines in the classroom enabling them to devote more of their attention to other aspects of their teaching. Finally, trial and error was a popular concept in the student teachers' understanding of their experience. This presented some difficulties because the evaluation of their practicum meant that they felt constrained to make errors and experiment with their teaching.

When is an experience not a learning experience?

For some of the student teachers, the task of describing the learning process in which they were engaged was very difficult and some doubted that they were learning much at all from their time in the school setting. This latter perception contrasts with the perceived popularity of the practicum reported most frequently from survey data (Zeichner, 1985). Such differences arise because of the more sensitive probe of methods used to collect data in this study which thus provide a more complete picture of the ways in which individual student teachers actually experience their practicum. The mixed feelings of the student teachers are demonstrated by the following comments:

> At times, every once in a while I get a glimpse of - yes I am learning something. It's hard to know. (Carolyn 6/5/91, p. 3)

> No I'm not really conscious of learning things. I don't think I am at all. It has been a good experience though. (Maria 1/5/91, p. 7)

In Maria's comment, there is an interesting distinction made between learning and having a good experience. This suggests that the experience gained in the practicum is not always associated with a learning process. Further analysis of the interview data of the study suggests some reasons for this. The student teachers who were most dissatisfied with the learning process of their practicum did not generally feel that they were getting the best *kind* of experience to bring about effective learning. In most cases, they were unable to articulate what constituted a learning experience and what did not, though their comments suggested an implicit distinguishing feature was the amount of freedom they were given in the classroom.

For example, Carolyn attributed her doubts about the amount of learning she was achieving at the practicum to the type of teaching she was doing in the class.

> In reading and spelling everything is pre-planned. It's pretty structured on what we have to teach. (Carolyn 6/5/91, p. 1)

> I have reflected on my lessons a couple of times here. There haven't been too many lessons that I've actually had to sit down and plan like a traditional lesson plan. A lot of it, like the reading, is all pretty much straight by the book. I pretty much go by the teacher's guide. (Carolyn 6/5/91, p. 5)

> There's not a whole lot of room for creativity. A lot is just routine. (Carolyn 6/5/91, p. 6)

Carolyn also explained how she did not learn anything in the early part of her practicum because she was "just getting accustomed to the routines of the classroom - classroom management and getting to know each student individually" (Carolyn 6/5/91, p. 5). She did not seem to see the value of this type of experience in terms of its potential to contribute to her learning.

All of the student teachers shared these perceptions to some extent. They all perceived that their development as teachers was hampered to a greater or lesser degree by the constraints placed on them during the practicum. Sometimes these constraints were caused specifically by the requirements of the teacher with whom they were placed and sometimes the constraints arose more generally from the perceived artificial nature of

practice teaching. This meant that much of the time they spent in the classroom, observing teaching, interacting with children, preparing and implementing lessons, was not seen as part of the learning process because it did not conform with their own images of what teaching should be like. These images of what teaching should be like usually revolved around working independently, using innovative approaches, and creating new materials and resources. If practice teaching did not provide the student teachers with the opportunity to prepare and teach in this way, it was not perceived as giving them the *right* kind of experience. It was seen to be a form of *experience* but not a *learning experience*.

There was a real dilemma between the desire to learn through teaching as they wanted to teach and the need to conform to the established classroom routine.

> Right now I can't do what I want to do. (Tammi 6/5/91, p. 2)

> I haven't had a chance to - not really. She [the co-operating teacher] told me they love worksheets and I can't teach worksheets. That's one thing I am bombing on. I don't like them. (Tammi 6/5/91, p. 3)

> Well see I don't think I can really be the teacher I want to be because this is not my classroom. Student teachers want to do what is in the guidelines of the co-operating teacher. (Roger 17/4/91, p. 1)

> But there are so many things that you want to do right and you want to make sure you're not doing anything against what the co-operating teacher is going with. There are a lot of things to remember and to try to stay within the guidelines and you try not to step on anyone's toes. and yet you try to do what you know. It's a combination of things that makes the experience difficult. It's like trying to live someone else's life. (Roger 17/4/91, p. 4)

> I'm not being myself. It's difficult to adjust to someone else's style. One of the problems I've had is that she's given me the classroom but there are restrictions. So it's like I'm driving *my* car, but someone else is telling me left or right, which way to go, how fast to go. (Roger 1/5/91 p. 3)

> It's a problem. Trying to do things in our own way without upsetting the routine of the classroom too much, but still trying to give something of ourselves. (Marilyn, 26/10/89, p. 4)

> Practice teaching should be a time of experimentation, but I feel extremely restricted and restrained because of that structured timetable. (Marilyn 8/11/89, p. 17)

Each of these student teachers experienced some difficulties and disappointments because of the requirements placed upon them by their supervising teachers. In some cases, this caused severe problems and at least one of the student teachers considered whether or not to continue with a teaching career at all.

Even those student teachers who did not feel particularly constrained by their supervising teachers' requirements were doubtful about the value of their experience because of the artificial nature of the practicum. Their doubts arose from the recognition that they were entering a classroom environment in which the permanent teacher had established a particular set of routines and relationships prior to their arrival. They felt like intruders into this environment and were therefore constrained in the number of changes they felt comfortable in making.

> Having just said that it should be an experimental time, the teacher has to live in that classroom once I go, so it's a false situation. (Marilyn 8/11/89, p. 18)

> All pracs are a false situation. I've walked into an environment that has been built and set. I can't just change it around... They have a routine and it works for them. (Laura 26/10/89, p. 8)

The perceived artificial nature of the practicum experience is well known in teacher education (Griffin, 1986; Richardson-Koehler, 1988; Zimpher, 1987). However, the responses of these student teachers show just how deep-seated this problem is. As soon as the experience is perceived as being artificial, its value as a learning experience is markedly diminished. To make matters worse, student teachers have definite views about what comprises an artificial situation. Many potentially valid experiences are dismissed in their entirety because the student teacher is not engaged in self-initiated, creative teaching of the type promoted in their teacher education programs. As soon as constraints are imposed, student teachers seem to become detached from the experience and therefore unable to see its contribution to their learning processes.

Some Implications for Teacher Education

Some of the problems outlined above have already been well documented. The need to consider the quality of the experience rather than the quantity of the experience has been argued previously by writers such as Zeichner (1990) who emphasises that "one should not assume, as has often been the case in the past, that experience equals

educative experience and that the more experience, the better" (p. 107). The purpose of this paper is not to repeat such warnings nor to add to the long list of articles which highlight the problems of the practicum. Rather, its purpose is to treat some of these perceptions of student teachers as problematic and to suggest how teacher educators might work with student teachers to change these perceptions. Two particular concerns arise from the preceding discussion. The first of these relates to the criteria which student teachers use to determine which experiences contribute to their learning processes. The second concern relates to the simplistic way in which student teachers perceive learning as building up a stock of experiences for use at a later time. Both concerns have implications for teacher educators who should be ensuring that the school experience components of teacher education programs contribute wherever possible to the process of learning to teach. The time which student teachers spend in classrooms is too limited for potentially valuable experiences to be wasted in terms of their contribution to this learning process.

With respect to the former concern identified, student teachers value experience as the most important way of learning to teach, but a deeper analysis of how experience is perceived suggests that there is a prevailing view of the type of experience which contributes to learning. Moreover, this prevailing view is a particularly narrow view. Ball and Feiman-Nemser (1988), in their study of student teachers in two programs, draw similar conclusions. Their findings suggest that student teachers believe that good teaching means creating your own lessons and materials. Student teachers, in their study, who were forced to rely on textbooks and teachers' guides because of the requirements of their supervising teachers were disappointed and confused about their practice teaching experience. As with the student teachers whose perceptions are recorded in the preceding discussion, this image of good teaching means that many experiences during practice teaching are not seen as valid contributors towards the process of learning to teach.

There is little doubt that teacher education programs have an important role to play in developing within student teachers images of good teaching and these may well contain elements which stress creativity and the need for teachers to respond to individual student needs through developing innovative programs and materials. However, for most teacher education programs, the luxury of placing all student teachers in classrooms which provide the absolute models of good teaching can never be realized. Therefore, it is essential for teacher educators to acknowledge that their students will be placed in classrooms and schools where it will not be possible for their images of good teaching to be realised at all times. In many cases, the reality is that significant compromises will be necessary. Once this is acknowledged, the role of teacher

educators takes on a dual purpose of promoting good teaching while at the same time assisting student teachers to learn from the full range of experiences in which they become involved.

Ball and Feiman-Nemser (1988) suggest that student teachers may be encouraged to use these less than ideal experiences, such as relying on textbooks or worksheets, as a "scaffold" from which to learn how to undertake more complex tasks of teaching. While student teachers dismiss such experiences as providing a valid contribution to their learning, they often do not have a scaffold on which to develop expertise in the more complex aspects of the teaching role. Teacher educators need to assist student teachers to see *all* their experiences as contributions to the complex and multifaceted task of learning to teach.

While this argument supports the value of using a wide range of simple and complex teaching experiences as ways of learning to teach, it should not be seen as advocating an approach which merely starts with gaining competency in simple technical skills, building up to complex technical skills. It is in this respect that the second of the two concerns mentioned above becomes important. This second concern relates to how experiences are used within the learning process. As the preceding discussion indicates, the student teachers in this study seemed to perceive the process of learning to teach as one of building up a stock of experiences which could be drawn upon at a later time. The banking metaphor was used to illustrate this perception. The number, type and range of experiences are important in this conception. The student teachers did not see themselves taking an active role in orchestrating these experiences nor in processing them. Transferability of learning from one experience to a new situation was not a strong element in this conception.

Britzman (1991) offers an explanation of the origins of this problem. She suggests that the discourse of teaching and student teaching is such that experience becomes objectified as a map and that student teachers believe that the process of becoming a teacher is one of following a preordained path (p. 7). Such a perception fails to acknowledge the complexity and unpredictability of teaching. It also fails to acknowledge the need for student teachers to take a very active role in determining the type of experiences in which they engage and in processing the contribution which those experiences make to their development as teachers. Again, teacher educators have a vital part to play in alerting student teachers to the need for taking this active role and in developing the required strategies associated with the role.

This is an urgent and compelling need for teacher educators to take heed of the way in which student teachers perceive the role of experience in learning to teach. The stakes

are high for the perceptions presented in this paper set the scene for much of the dissatisfaction which has long been associated with the process of teacher education. They imply that, in order to become a teacher, one must be exposed to all the experiences which one is likely to encounter in a teaching career. In this sense, teacher education is seen as the means of building up a healthy stock of experiences so that beginning teachers feel well equipped to handle the classroom situation. The dangers inherent in such thinking are obvious. Student teachers can never be exposed to all the experiences they are likely to encounter in their careers. Student teachers will always feel that their teacher education programs fail to give them sufficient practical experiences. The practicum will always be considered to be too short. Dissatisfaction and cynicism appear to be the only likely outcomes of this view of the role of experience in learning to teach.

In these terms, the experience alone is not enough. It is the thought and subsequent action that is associated with the experience which determines its value in the learning process. A number of writers use different ways of describing this active process of using experience to learn about teaching. Russell (1991) uses Schon's notion of reflection-in-action to describe the active process of reframing experience to test new actions. Russell (1991) stresses how the development of practical knowledge from experience occurs only when one has "a perspective that recognizes the possibility and the importance of being attentive to experience and the opportunities to learn from it" (p. 2). In slightly different terms, Rubin (1989) describes how good teachers frequently rely on intuitive knowledge which "stems from insight gleaned through past classroom encounters which repeatedly have been processed and internalized through reflection about teaching and learning" (p. 32). This active process of "reaching back into experience" in an active way is also used by Britzman (1991) to distinguish between mere circumstance and lived experience. According to Britzman (1991), the distinction comes in:

> .... our capacity to bestow experience with meanings, be reflective, and take action. Without an awareness of potential and given meanings, and our own capacity to extend experience through interpretation and risk, without this active side, our capacity to participate in the shaping of experience is limited. (p. 34)

Experience may well be the best teacher, but this will only be true if student teachers are willing to use the full range of experiences they encounter as contributors to their learning process. Moreover, this learning process needs to be one of actively seeking specific experiences from which to learn and then actively processing the learnings from those experiences.

References

Amarel, M. and Feiman-Nemser, S. (1988) *Prospective teachers' views of teaching and learning to teach.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Ball, D. and Feiman-Nemser, S. (1988) Using Textbooks and Teachers' Guides: A Dilemma for Beginning Teachers and Teacher Educators. *Curriculum Inquiry,* 18 (4), 401-423.

Britzman, D. (1991) *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach.* New York, SUNY Press.

Clandinin, D. J. (1986) *Classroom Practice: Teacher Images in Action.* Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Connelly, F. M. and Clandinin D. J. (1988) *Teachers as Curriculum Planners.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Eisner, E. (1983) The Art and Craft of Teaching. *Educational Leadership,* January, 5-13.

Elbaz, F. (1983) *Teacher Thinking: A Study of Practical Knowledge.* London: Croom Helm.

Eltis, K. and Cairns, L. (1982) Perceived Effectiveness of Supervisors of the Practicum. *The Australian Journal of Teaching Practice,* 2 (2), 101-110.

Griffin, G. (1988) Issues in student teaching: A Review. In Raths, J. and Katz, L. (Eds.) *Advances in Teacher Education* (Vol. 2). Norwood: Ablex.

Guyton, E. and McIntyre, D. (1990) Student Teaching and School Experiences. in Houston, W. (ed) *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education.* New York: Macmillan.

Johnston, S. (1990) Understanding curriculum decision-making though teacher images. *Journal of Curriculum Studies.* 22 (5), 463-471.

Leinhardt, G., Weidman, C. and Hammond, K. (1987) Introduction and Integration of Classroom Routines by Expert Teachers. *Curriculum Inquiry,* 17 (2), 135-175.

Price, D. (1980) Some Recommendations for the Management and Evaluation of the Practicum. *The Australian Journal of Teaching Practice,* 1 (1), 51-58.

Queensland Board of Teacher Education (1984) *School Experience in Queensland Teacher Education Programs.* Brisbane: Research Report.

Richardson-Koehler, V. (1988) Barriers to the effective supervision of student teachers: A field study. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 39 (2), 28-34.

Rubin, L. (1989) The thinking Teacher: Cultivating Pedagogical Intelligence. *Journal of Teacher Education*, November-December, 31-34.

Russell, T. (1991) *Critical Attributes of a Reflective Teacher.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Schneider, B. (1987) Tracing the Provenance of Teacher Education. in Popkewitz, T. (ed.) *Critical Studies in Teacher Education.* Lewes: The Falmer Press.

Zeichner, K. (1980) Myths and Realities: Field-Based Experience in Teacher Education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 31 (6), 45-55.

Zeichner, K. (1985) The Ecology of Field Experience: Toward an Understanding of the Role of Field Experiences in Teacher Development. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 18 (3), 44-52.

Zeichner, K. (1986) The practicum as an occasion for learning to teach. *The South Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 12 (1).

Zeichner, K. (1990) Changing Directions in the Practicum: looking ahead to the 1990s. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 16 (2), 105-132.

Zimpher, N. (1987) Current trends in research on university supervision of student teaching. In Huberman, M. and Backus, J. (Eds.) *Advances in Teacher Education* (Vol. 3) Norwood: Ablex.